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Female migrant workers navigating the service economy in Shanghai

Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood

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Conclusion:

Past, Present, and Future(s)

Reaching the end of this dissertation, I wish to take the opportunity to revisit my research and my journeys and fieldwork in Shanghai, both in personal and academic terms. Following a reflection on the past, I will reflect on the present status of my chapters and the arguments developed therein, as well as rethinking my research position in the historical present – as a witness to an economic transition, led by Xi Jinping, in which the service sectors are taken as a tool to counter the problems of the economic slowdown in China after decades of industrialization. Then, I will engage with potential future research, relating it back to the three issues I have focused on: home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood.

Past: Outsider and Researcher

In 2014, I arrived in Shanghai to start my fieldwork. At that time, I had a limited network in Shanghai, so I contacted my Shanghainese friend Kikker and asked her if she knew of any rural migrant women willing to be my research participants. To my

surprise, she responded that there were no migrant workers in Shanghai. After calmly telling her that there were in fact 4.1 million migrant women in Shanghai (see Chen 2011), and asking her how she could possibly say there were none, she explained:

There are *waidiren* (外地人 – literally, outsider) but you don't see them. If you want to find informants, you can find them in restaurants or hair salons. Migrant women work in these kinds of places. Also, I have to tell you that I don't like them. They are noisy, dirty, and destroy the order here in Shanghai.

Her narrative has become imprinted in my head because it touched on two key concerns of mine about this research project.

First, I was bewildered that my friend, a well-educated Shanghai woman, so bluntly confided her feelings about rural-urban migrants, and had chosen to remain blind to the omnipresence of rural-urban migrant service workers. Even though she must have had to engage with these service workers whenever she consumed services, these workers were seemingly “invisible” to her because they were “outsiders,” perceived as noisy and dirty, who, to her, disturbed the order of Shanghai as she knew

it. Her words, as well as her presence during my fieldwork in Shanghai, constantly reminded me of the problematic of the strong rural/urban divide in China and the associated discourse of *suzhidi* (素质低 – literally, “low quality”) people, which has been analyzed and theorized by Ana Anagnost (2004). Kikker’s remarks suggest that, among those with an urban *hukou*, it is regarded as acceptable to look down upon rural-urban migrants, an attitude that I wanted to challenge through my research. My apprehensions about how a group of people can be perceived as “invisible,” or be put in a blind spot as “the avisual” (Peeren 2014, 36-37) by local Shanghai people led me to want to assert their presence and position them as living meaningful lives in Shanghai, despite their visibility being obscured from the gaze of city people by a national policy reinforcing a rigid sense of social hierarchy and encouraging injustice.

The second concern Kikker’s remark raised for me is that I am also an “outsider” to the rural migrant workforce in Shanghai; I am of a different “class” and *laojia* (老家 – literally, hometown) than my research participants because I am a Hong Kong citizen. The discourse of outsider/insider for qualitative researchers has drawn intense discussion in academia (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Spradley [1980] 2016; Thomas et al., 2000; see also Kam 2013). As Dwyer and Buckle comment, the

benefit of “being a member of the group” or of being known as an insider is that “one’s membership automatically provides a level of trust in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to ‘outsiders’” (2009, 58). The challenge of being an outsider to the research group is that participants may be less willing to share or disclose their experiences (see Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Recalling my experiences of when I first began doing interviews, I found it difficult to find connections with the research participants, let alone to build trust between myself as a researcher and those whose experiences I wanted to research. Seeing the challenges I faced, I started to search for and then watched the most popular Chinese and Korean TV dramas,¹ movies, music, and entertainment shows among the age groups of the migrant women I was approaching. Additionally, I learned Mandarin slang and some Shanghai dialect, and explored the popular terminologies used on the Internet and in people’s everyday lives in Shanghai. Thus equipped, I started to use my knowledge of popular culture to bridge the gap between

¹ As told to me by many of my research participants, they like watching Korean dramas, with Chinese subtitles, during their leisure time. Therefore, I watched not only Chinese television shows but also Korean ones.

my research participants and myself. In this way, I transformed myself from a total outsider to the rural migrant community in Shanghai into someone able to share some cultural experiences with my participants. I also befriended some of my participants and made my return trips more fruitful with their help. All this enabled me to obtain reliable accounts of the day-to-day lives of the women service workers, and the challenges and positive moments they experience in Shanghai, which, in this study, I mobilize to counter perceptions like Kikker's.

Now: Five Chapters and Multiple Lives

My aim was not only to recognize the multiplicity and complexity of rural migrant women's lives in Shanghai, but also to defy generalizations about their victimhood or celebrations of their agency. Building on a growing body of literature that has captured the everyday experiences of service workers in China (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan 2008; Zheng 2003, 2009), the five chapters of this study comprehend the everyday experiences of rural migrant women in the service sector in Shanghai through the lens of three issues: the sense of home, the beauty economy, and the stigma of singlehood. My analysis shows that

some of the female migrant service workers interviewed find ways to cope with the challenges thrown up by their precarious everyday lives: struggles with their urban employers and customers in the workplace, difficulties securing jobs and/or places to live in the city, and the temptation to leave Shanghai to work in another city or to return home, among others.

My analysis reveals the multiple lives rural migrant women in the service sector live and how these lives nuance the grand state-supported narratives of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization in post-reform China. The everyday private lives of these women, who are more than just workers, deserve the kind of detailed analysis that is often absent from existing academic scholarship on their plight. Although there is a wealth of literature focusing on the sexual attitudes and sexual behavior of rural-urban migrants, as well as on the sex workers among them (Sudhinaraset, et al. 2012; Zheng 2009), other aspects of their everyday lives are apparently insufficiently juicy to capture the attention of academics or the media spotlight. Probing both the private lives and work-lives of Shanghai female migrant service workers, this study has documented their narratives and statements, as well as the cultural transformations they have experienced and are experiencing, and the

strategic practices they have developed to deal with these transformations in order to provide a counterweight to the often singularly negative narratives told about these women's lives. As such, through my analysis, I contest generalizations by which rural migrant women are perceived to be victims of China's urban development without any agency.

Future(s)

With regard to all three of the issues addressed in this study, future research building on this study is not only possible but necessary. For the discussion of labor migration and its effect on migrants' sense of home, my research suggests that future scholarship should pay more attention to migrants' continuing, complex relationship with their rural hometown (or country of origin in case of international labor migration).

Because the migrants I have discussed tend to remain connected to their hometowns and may travel back and forth frequently between it and the city, their continuing attachment to the hometown as "home" may affect the extent to which they feel at home in the urban environment. Moreover, as my study shows, the rural place of origin and the city are governed by different social and cultural norms, including

gender norms, with different behaviors attracting stigmatization. Rural migrant women are not unaware of this, but, in many cases, develop sophisticated coping strategies to negotiate these different norms in order to avoid or lessen the degree of stigmatization. This is another reason why it is important to pay heed to the “in-between-ness” of migrants and the different social and cultural worlds they live in, almost simultaneously. Doing this allows us to capture aspects of migrants’ experience that may be missed in studies that exclusively focus on the relationship they develop to the cities they move to.

With regard to the beauty economy and its enforcement of a particular notion of female beauty, I want to suggest that it would be productive to revisit the valuation of youth. As my research participant Jojo, a 28-year-old hairstylist from Yangzhou, reminded me:

To work in this industry, one cannot be too old. People join the industry when they are 15 to 20 years old because it takes a long time for one to learn the techniques. If your age is too old, your capability to adapt to change and accept new techniques is lower. Also, your physical ability is worse than that

of the young ones.

Beauty service workers may also lose their jobs because they grow older and can no longer meet the beauty standards imposed by their employers and customers. Aging, as such, is a grave concern among migrant women working in the service sector, and especially the beauty industry. Furthermore, as explained by Otis, business owners can maintain a low-wage system to sustain their business by hiring young rural women with few working skills and a low education level and then firing them when they become more expensive (Otis 2012). This issue pervades the service sector as a whole, because youth and attractiveness have become an integral part of the services that are consumed, exploited by both the service industry and the customers (see Otis 2012). What happens to older migrant workers as a consequence of this – do they move to other sectors or return to their rural hometowns? – is an issue worth exploring in greater detail.

Last but not the least, in relation to the stigma of singlehood, the overwhelming academic and media attention for the discourse of “leftover women” has largely overshadowed the cultural and political problems faced in contemporary

China by other groups of singles and people in relationships considered unconventional. In this way, both the media and academics seem to be playing into the government's hands, as "leftover women" is a term promoted by the government to deal with the fact that high-educated, high-income, high-professional women are less willing to get married, which is seen as undesirable (Fincher 2014; To 2013; see also Gaetano 2015). As this study has shown, rural-urban migrant women fall outside the category of "leftover women" because they are not professional educated women. This, however, does not mean that their remaining single as they get older is acceptable; like "leftover women," they face stigmatization, especially in their rural hometowns, and have to devise ways of dealing with this. More research is needed, therefore, into the different forms the stigma of singlehood takes for different groups of women, and into the strategies these women can mobilize to counter this stigma.

Moreover, at a historical point when the government of the PRC has revised the One-Child Policy to the Two-Child Policy, I propose that it is not only the problematic of "leftover women" or female singlehood more generally that we should be concerned with, but also, for example, the way migrant women who are married may be stigmatized for living apart from their husbands and/or children, and at the

same time be pressured by their families to reproduce a second child. In addition, it is also relevant to look at singlehood among men, which is increasingly common, especially in rural areas, as a consequence of the demographic imbalance between men and women induced by the one-child policy and the preference for male children. More urgently, at a time that homosexuals and other sexual minorities are being suppressed by the Chinese government, I suggest broadening the investigation of stigmatization by focusing not just on singlehood and certain forms of married life, but also on other relationship forms, always taking into account that such stigmatization, as well as the strategies developed to cope with and challenge it, may take different forms depending on, for example, the context (urban or rural) or one's class, profession or education level.

Finally, I propose that future research on rural-urban migrant women should contemplate not only focusing on the poorest, unskilled group, but also including the voices of the wealthier and more skilled. It is important to acknowledge various forms of diversity, including economic diversity, within migrant communities. I maintain that the more different experiences and voices research into migration and its effects can capture and take into account, the more insights it will produce.

I want to close with the words of Pang Yuan, a 25-year-old hairstylist from Hunan, which I also quoted in the introduction and in Chapter 3:

“I believe we can change our fate.”

These words, together with the narratives of all the migrant women interviewed for this study, remind me to remain hopeful and optimistic, even in the face of profound challenges, and to focus not only on the precarity of the lives of rural-urban migrant women working in the service sector in Shanghai, but also on their multiplicity and potentiality.